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# Nothing Is Erased: Hubert Damisch and Jean Dubuffet\*

SOPHIE BERREBI

“Dubuffet had all the reasons in the world to be suspicious of me,” Hubert Damisch mischievously observed when I asked him about the circumstances in which he came to edit Dubuffet’s collected writings, which appeared as two thick tomes in 1967 under the title *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants* (hereafter *PES*).<sup>1</sup> For the pairing—between an artist who gave lectures bearing such explicit titles as “Anticultural Positions” and a young philosopher some thirty years his junior, formerly a student of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who was soon to embark on a thesis in art history with Pierre Francastel—was anything but expected.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Dubuffet did not refrain from teasing Damisch occasionally; for instance, he called “The Real Robinson,” Damisch’s preface to his writings, “doctoral.”<sup>3</sup> Yet even as he debated with him about the academic tone of that text, Dubuffet accepted Damisch’s idea of making a bigger project of this collection. Damisch included in it not only all of the artist’s texts but also dozens of letters to different correspondents, organizing them in a labyrinthine structure that has the fascinating character of a hypertext. Dubuffet eventually came to terms with that preface, going so far as to sign some letters under the nickname “Robinson II.”

The collection of articles and letters included in this issue of *October* represents, with two exceptions, all the texts Damisch published on Dubuffet during the artist’s lifetime, as well as the essay “Entrée en matière,” which Damisch

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1. Conversation with Hubert Damisch, Paris, January 2014. Following those first two volumes, Damisch edited two more in 1995: Jean Dubuffet, *Prospectus et tous écrits suivants*, four volumes (Paris: Gallimard, 1967 and 1995).

2. Jean Dubuffet, “Anticultural Positions,” lecture given at the Chicago Arts Club on December 20, 1951, *PES*, vol. 1, pp. 94–100, and notes by Damisch, pp. 472–73.

3. “Robinsonnades II: The Real Robinson,” trans. Rosalind E. Krauss, *October* 85 (Summer 1998), pp. 19–40.

wrote in the immediate aftermath of Dubuffet's death.<sup>4</sup> The correspondence between the artist and the writer is complete, except for several letters discussing corrections to galleys of the two volumes of *PES*. This English translation forms approximately one third of a book, which will be published in French in March 2016, containing all of Damisch's texts and correspondence with the artist.<sup>5</sup> It testifies to a complex relationship of thirty-five years made up of mutual understanding and occasional "breakups." Whereas Dubuffet found in Damisch more than just a bright critic, the encounter for Damisch amounted to no less than an aesthetic education, at the very moment that he shifted his field of research from philosophy to art history. If Damisch's contribution to the literature on Dubuffet is considerable, this compilation also makes visible what has so far remained a blind spot in the scholarship on Damisch, namely, the major role played by Dubuffet in his thinking. Reflections on the notion of origin; on history and art history; on beauty and the undersides of painting (what he calls "les dessous de la peinture"), all of which will return years or even decades later in some of Damisch's most important books, were first sketched out in his writings on Dubuffet.<sup>6</sup>

The year they met, 1961, marks a turning point in Dubuffet's career. He had recently completed the *Texturologies* and *Matériologies* series that constituted an end point of the exploration of pictorial matter initiated in the *Hautes pâtes* relief paintings of the mid-1940s. In 1961, Dubuffet painted the largely monochromatic *Légendes* series, from which he moved on to the vividly colored world of *Paris Circus*. At the same time, he rekindled his interest in *art brut* and organized the return of the collection that had been stored for a decade at the East Hampton home of his friend Alfonso Ossorio. His first French-museum retrospective ended in February 1961, and was followed less than a year later by a large survey exhibition curated by Peter Selz at MoMA (the show subsequently traveled to Chicago and Los Angeles). At that point, Dubuffet began work on the *Hourloupe* cycle, which would occupy him for more than a decade.

In 1961, Damisch was thirty-three years old and had already published close to twenty pieces, including a critical essay on the discipline of art history; articles on the Bauhaus, Mondrian, and Pollock; and a long study of the cloud in Italian Renaissance painting that would form the basis of his thesis and his 1972 book *A*

4. The two exceptions are "La lecture du monde," which is available online, and "Le vrai Robinson," a translation of which appeared previously in *October*.

5. Sophie Berrebi, ed., *Hubert Damisch, Jean Dubuffet: Entrée en matière, Correspondance 1961–1985, Textes 1961–2001* (Paris and Zurich: La Maison Rouge, Fondation Antoine de Galbert, and JRP Ringier, 2016).

6. I pointed out the importance of Damisch's writings for Dubuffet scholarship in my earlier research: Sophie Berrebi, "The Outsider as Insider, Jean Dubuffet and the United States, 1945–1962," Ph.D. diss., Courtauld Institute, London, 2002, introduction. Kent Minturn is one of the rare authors to have researched the role of Dubuffet in Damisch's writings; see his "Contre-Histoire: The Postwar Art and Writings of Jean Dubuffet," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, New York, 2007, chapter 6, as well as "Dubuffet avec Damisch" in this issue.

*Theory of /Cloud/*.<sup>7</sup> He had, in the years before, completed his philosophy studies with Merleau-Ponty and written a master's thesis on Ernst Cassirer. A former jazz musician, he had a day job at UNESCO. He would resume his studies in 1967 at the École pratique des hautes études, after a semester spent at Yale in 1963–64 on a Focillon fellowship. It is probably wise not to overemphasize the fact that Damisch met Dubuffet only months after Merleau-Ponty's untimely death in March 1961; yet this encounter, in the artist's studio, doubtless contributed to his intellectual displacement from philosophy towards art history by means of a critical and personal engagement with an artist of his own time.

In contrast to others who wrote on Dubuffet—critics from the same generation and writers grouped around the Gallimard publishing house and its journals—Damisch never bowed to Dubuffet's opinions. Yet neither would he voice—as André Chastel, who commissioned his first essay, had hoped—fierce criticism.<sup>8</sup> Refusing from the start to give in to the romance of the artist as former wine dealer and critic of “cultural values,” Damisch meticulously *read* Dubuffet as well as looked at his works. Dubuffet perceived at once, it seems, the quality of this new interlocutor: In a letter from June 1962 he wrote to him: “What you write about your search for information on the springs and roots of human life makes you seem graced with strong curiosity, and I would even think that I am like you in this respect.”<sup>9</sup> In the following years, Dubuffet would point out again and again the similarities he perceived between himself and Damisch, even though the latter clearly worked against the grain of the artist's rhetoric, notably by inserting Dubuffet within a history of art and a history of philosophy. In his first article, “La lecture du monde” (which is not included here), Damisch calls upon Goya, Courbet, Gauguin, and Géricault, as well as the Italian Renaissance, to locate Dubuffet's practice conceptually.<sup>10</sup> In the next articles, philosophy replaces art: Perception, doubt, the origin and ends of art, are, through references to Merleau-Ponty, Descartes, and Heidegger, called upon to analyze and deconstruct the artist's arguments. Provocation and humor often trickle through his writing; in an essay from 1964, Damisch calls Dubuffet a “founding father” (a phrase he dropped when the text was reprinted in the 1976 book *Ruptures/Cultures*). Moreover, Damisch does not hesitate to confront Dubuffet with his contradictions, as when he writes to him, in the midst of a frosty period in their relationship, in 1967: “It is true that nothing is erased, that everything is indelible. You are the man to say so and to want it, you the champion of forgetting.”<sup>11</sup> Yet there is nothing gratuitous in

7. “Conditions d'une histoire de l'art,” *Les Lettres Nouvelles* 48 (April 1957), pp. 583–88, and 49 (May 1957), pp. 742–53; “Walter Gropius et le Bauhaus,” *L'Année Sociologique*, 1956–1957; “L'éveil du regard,” *Les Lettres Nouvelles* 61 (June 1958), pp. 891–99, and 62 (July–Aug. 1958), pp. 109–14; “La figure et l'entrelacs,” *Les Lettres Nouvelles* (nouvelle série) 33 (December 9, 1959), pp. 36–43, and 34 (December 16, 1959), pp. 34–38; and “Un outil plastique: Le nuage,” *Revue d'Esthétique* 1–2 (1958), pp. 104–48. *Théorie du /nuage/* (Paris: Seuil, 1972); translated by Janet Lloyd in English as *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

8. Conversation with Hubert Damisch, Paris, February 28, 2015.

9. Letter from Jean Dubuffet to Hubert Damisch, June 7, 1962.

10. “Dubuffet ou la lecture du monde,” *Art de France*, January 1962; English translation by Kent Minturn, “Dubuffet or the Reading of the World,” *Art in Translation* 6, no. 3 (2014), pp. 299–316.

11. Letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet, January 31, 1967 (no. 38 in this issue).

these provocations: Ultimately, Dubuffet trusted a writer who, he probably realized, was one of the very few who were able to break free from the mimeticism that blinded so many of his exegetes. Unlike them, Damisch was not only a philosopher but also a scholar with a broader range of interests, who was aware, for example, of Dubuffet's critical reception in the United States: He frequently cited Clement Greenberg's reviews from the late 1940s, and was in particular struck by his coining of the phrase "lumpen art" to characterize Dubuffet's painting.

The last text included in this selection, "Entrée en matière" (Starting ground), dates from 1985.<sup>12</sup> As noted above, it was written at the time of Dubuffet's death, and in it Damisch considers the loss of his interlocutor (the essay, he announces, was *destined* for the artist) and the way in which his reading and writing are affected by the passage to posterity of the work. "Entrée en matière" is a matrix from which all of Damisch's subsequent texts on the artist develop.<sup>13</sup> His discussion of Dubuffet's complicated search for an "entrance" into fine art, his difficulty in taking a position and finding a voice, mirrors Damisch's own efforts to find a new entrance into the work, a new departure, after Dubuffet's final exit.

When, in 1961, Damisch wrote "La lecture du monde," after completing two major articles on Pollock and Mondrian, he probably did not yet know that these three artists would form, two decades later, the triumvirate that opens his (still untranslated) book on modern art *Fenêtre jaune cadmium* (1984). He brings the artists together around a reading of Balzac's *Unknown Masterpiece* in order to explore the question of the undersides of painting, a theme that enables him to write a phenomenological and nonteleological interpretation of modernism.<sup>14</sup> A sign of the importance of Dubuffet in this constellation is provided by the book's subtitle, *Les dessous de la peinture*, which directly echoes the title of a 1950 illustrated book by Dubuffet and Jean Paulhan: *La métromanie ou les dessous de la capitale*.<sup>15</sup>

Damisch's essays written between 1962 and 1985 show clearly the role played by Dubuffet as Damisch investigates art through philosophy and philosophy through art: Allusions to Merleau-Ponty in "La lecture du monde" give way to references to Descartes in "Méthode seconde" (1964), a text that reads as a posthumous dialogue with Merleau-Ponty, who discussed Descartes in the third chapter of *The Eye and the Mind* (1964). A couple of years earlier, the French publication of Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" had prompted Damisch to reflect upon this reading

12. Hubert Damisch, "Entrée en matière" (Saint-Paul-de-Vence: Fondation Maeght, 1985), pp. 13–35.

13. In a plan for the republication of his essays on Dubuffet that he devised several years ago, Damisch interwove all the essays written after 1985 into "Entrée en matière." See Sophie Berrebi, ed., *Hubert Damisch, Jean Dubuffet: Entrée en matière, Correspondance 1961–1985, Textes 1961–2001*, part I.

14. On *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*, see the review by Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting as Model," *October* 37 (Summer 1986), pp. 125–37; reprinted in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 245–57.

15. I discuss the connection between the two titles, and the theme of the undersides of painting and the underground of the city, in my "Metromania or the Undersides of Painting," in *Paris-Amsterdam Underground: Essays on Cultural Resistance, Subversion, and Diversion*, ed. Christoph Lindner and Andrew Hussey (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), pp. 24–36.

in “The Work, the Art, the Work of Art.”<sup>16</sup> Damisch invoked the issue of origin with regard to Dubuffet’s repeated returns to his beginnings in *Paris Circus* and later in *L’Hourloupe*, thereby developing his first thoughts on a subject he would return to twenty years later in a different context in *The Origin of Perspective* (1987). In his early essays, Damisch thus reveals the theoretical underpinnings of his reflections on art history, a discipline whose founding and methods he relentlessly questioned.

Overall, Damisch’s approach focuses more on making sense of the dynamics and the internal logic of Dubuffet’s oeuvre than on close readings of specific paintings. This tactic enabled him to introduce themes that would later be explored elsewhere, themes of *thickness* (in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*), of origin, and of culture (in *Ruptures/Cultures*). In these topics as in several others, Dubuffet is present as in a game-theory “subgame,” in which an underlying equilibrium exists between two players.<sup>17</sup> When one reads Damisch’s *The Judgment of Paris* (1991), for example, it is impossible not to think of the notorious *Corps de dames* pictures from 1950–51 in which Dubuffet brought to the painting’s surface the genitalia that, so Freud argued, simultaneously trigger fear and desire. In the same way, I see the *Terres radiées* as one of the starting points for Damisch’s reflections on drawing in *Traité du trait*, the exhibition he curated at the Louvre in 1995.<sup>18</sup> In pointing out the way in which these drawings foreground a line that lets the background become a figure, rather than outline a figure that detaches it from a background, Damisch turns the *Terres radiées* into an influential treatise on drawing.

In his preface to *Ruptures/Cultures*, Damisch wrote, “A collection of texts is not a book in that it is first of all a ‘story,’ that is, an account in the plural form, discontinuous, woven by cultures and ruptures.”<sup>19</sup> The collection of essays and letters in this issue conforms to this definition of an edited volume: It weaves together a personal exchange and an intellectual education. In 1983, detaching himself a little more from the man he had once called a “founding father” and whose writings he had compiled, Damisch wrote to his true Robinson:

I will phone you then, in the first days of January, when I return from my island where I’m going to lock myself up for a few days. Do you know what for? To compile a few old texts and make my own little book. Among these, one that I hold particularly dear, and which was, long ago, it was yesterday, at the start of our friendship.<sup>20</sup>

16. Martin Heidegger, “L’origine de l’œuvre d’art,” in *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

17. In game theory, “subgame” refers to the concept of “subgame perfect equilibrium,” which was theorized by the economist Richard Selten and has applications in chess. Damisch used it in a conversation with the author to describe how balanced his relationship with Dubuffet ultimately was, despite appearances to the contrary. Chess has played an important role for Damisch. He refers to the game in several texts and famously in the exhibition *Moves: Playing Chess and Cards with the Museum*, which he curated in 1997 at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam and in the accompanying book *L’amour m’expose* (Yves Gevaert, Bruxelles 2000).

18. *Traité du trait: Tractatus tractus*, Paris, Musée du Louvre, April 26–July 24, 1995.

19. Hubert Damisch, *Ruptures/Cultures* (Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1976), p. 16. Translation by the author.

20. Letter from Hubert Damisch to Jean Dubuffet, December 6, 1983. The book Damisch alludes to in this letter is *Fenêtre jaune cadmium*. The island is Belle-Île, in Brittany, where Damisch has gone regularly since 1968.